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SUBJECT: CSTO ESTABLISHES RAPID REACTION FORCE

Classified By: Acting Political M/C David Kostelancik. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) On February 4 the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) agreed at a summit in Moscow to establish the Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF), to be based in Russia and under a single command. Medvedev proclaimed the CRRF would be "well-trained" and receive the most modern equipment to repulse military aggression, fight international crime, conduct counternarcotics and counterterrorism operations, and respond to natural disasters. It will be "just as good as comparable NATO forces," he said. Medvedev added that this force had already existed on paper, but now the CSTO states had decided to activate the force.

¶2. (U) The final make-up of the CRRF is not yet defined, but Medvedev said Russia is prepared to provide a division and a brigade -- about 10,000 personnel. Kazakhstan looks set to contribute a brigade of 3-4 thousand personnel, and the remaining CSTO states would contribute a battalion each. In addition to soldiers, the CRRF would also contain disaster relief and Interior Ministry forces. The total size of the CRRF would therefore be about 15,000 personnel. Uzbekistan declined to participate in the CRRF on a permanent basis, but would release troops ad hoc.

¶3. (C) The experts viewed the CRRF as a statement of Russia's intentions in the region, to provide the legal basis for Russian intervention in CIS countries, and give it a handy tool to react to emergencies before outside countries such as the United States could intervene. Some experts told us it also reflected a fear that instability in Afghanistan could spread to the poverty-stricken, authoritarian regimes in Central Asia.

¶4. (C) The experts, however, do not take the CRRF seriously. They doubt CSTO states, especially in Central Asia, possess the resources to contribute to its operation. They noted that the Belarusian constitution did not permit Belarusian soldiers to be based outside of Belarus. There was also some doubt of the willingness of some states to intervene in the affairs of other CSTO member states. They assess that, until concrete steps are taken to establish the CRRF, it will remain a propaganda tool only. We will report more details on the establishment of this force as they become known.

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